The Struggle Against Racism: Theoretical and Strategic Perspectives

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“The claim, presented as an essential postulate of historical materialism, that every fluctuation of politics and ideology can be presented as an immediate expression of the structure, must be contested in theory as primitive infantilism, and combatted in practice with the authentic testimony of Marx, the author of concrete political and historical works.” Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, p. 407.

At the plenary session of the 8th Communist University of London in 1976, Sam Aaronovich suggested that the strategy of the Communist Party was in advance of the theoretical analysis that was needed to provide the underpinning for the British Road to Socialism. Even in the short time-period that has elapsed since that talk was delivered, advances at the level of theory have been developing rapidly within the British Communist Party, as was seen during the British Road to Socialism debate, and as can be found in the pages of Marxism Today, Socialist Europe, Red Letters, and Euro-Red, or the Communist University Papers.¹

This process of theoretical enrichment and renewal within the Communist Party must be seen, however, in terms of “uneven development”. The struggle against racism is one area in which the Communist Party’s political intervention has not been much or recently underscored by theoretical analysis and discussion, with the exception of Dave Cook’s recent pamphlet A knife at the throat of us all²; compare this to the ever-increasing depth and subtlety of the Marxist analysis of the position of women found in the Communist Party, inspired by and contributing to the development of the women’s liberation movement and the struggle against sexism.

² D. Cook, A knife at the throat of us all-racism and the National Front (CP pamphlet).

This article is an attempt to begin to fill that gap by examining some of the major strands of anti-racist political strategy to be found currently on the left in Britain and by elaborating some of their theoretical assumptions.

I ECONOMIC REDUCTIONISM IN THE ANALYSIS OF RACISM AND ITS POLITICAL EFFECTS

There is increasing acknowledgment within the Communist Party, and more generally on the British left, that much traditional Marxist analysis has suffered from economic determinism and class reductionism—that is the tendency to reduce the complexity of the political and ideological levels of a social formation to its economic base, and to reduce all social, political and ideological movements and struggles to the class interests of which such movements are the simple expression. All social contradictions, then, are reduced to the “primary” contradiction at the point of production.

In my view, this reductionism is still found within much of the left’s discussion of racism: racism is reduced to its “essence”, which is economic exploitation, class oppression, and the manipulation of intra-class sectarianism. Whether it is the epoch of slavery, of nineteenth-century imperialism or the contemporary capitalist metropolis, in each case racist ideologies are developed by the ruling class and the state in order to justify enslavement, colonial subjugation, and metropolitan super-exploitation or marginalisation respectively; and also to divide the working-class by the fostering of scientifically spurious “racial” divisions. Racism must therefore be fought as an aspect of class organisation and mobilisation, and in terms of the struggle for socialism.

A typical statement of this position can be found in an editorial of Black Struggle—a journal “against racism and capitalism”:—
"racism is . . . one variance of a mechanism of capitalism which facilitates, justifies and maintains the super-exploitation of blacks . . . the struggle against racism must be anti-capitalist both in its theory and practice."

Conspiracy theory

At the theoretical level this approach is inadequate in that it analyses racism as essentially a ruling-class conspiracy: capitalism "needs" a cheap or a divided economic and political needs are met by producing the racist ideology and practices which enable the super-exploitation and the sectarianism to occur.

The work of Oliver Cromwell Cox has been a classic source for this type of analysis:

"race prejudice is a social attitude propagated among the public by an exploiting class for the purpose of stigmatising some group as inferior so that the exploitation of either the group itself or its resources or both may be justified . . . the capitalist exploiter will devise and employ race prejudice when that becomes convenient."

Alongside this simplistic analysis of racist ideology, Marxists have tended to operate with a crude, instrumental view of the relationship between the development of state policy and the class interests expressed in such policies. Thus A. Sivanandan, in his important analysis of "the black experience in Britain", argues that shifts in British legislation on race can be directly equated with and explained by the shifting interests of British capital:—

"Capital requires racism not for racism's sake but for the sake of capital. Hence at a certain level of economic activity (witness the colonies) it finds it more profitable to abandon the idea of superiority of capital. Racism dies in order that capital might survive."

Thus we tend to see reproduced in much Marxist analysis of racism the mechanistic formulations criticised within the pages of Marxism Today by Paul Corrigan and Alan Booth with reference to Marxist analysis of the state, or Brian Simon on the education system, or Martin Jacques on youth culture, it has parallels, too, with the early crude assessment of sexism as a product of capitalism, and the women's liberation movement as a diversion from the class struggle.

A less mechanical and more dialectical Marxist analysis would argue that an interpretation of racist ideologies and practices in terms of their fulfilment of the economic needs of capital and the political will of the ruling class is at best a very partial and over-generalised analysis, and at worst misleading and an opening to politically disastrous consequences.

Relative autonomy

The perils of economic determinism and class reductionism can be avoided by the adoption of a framework of "relative autonomy" which argues that racist ideologies and practices are not reducible to the economy or to class questions, central though these may be.

Thus the theories and ideologies produced by Enoch Powell, Hans Eysenck and Martin Webster have their own relatively autonomous determinations, they are the results of theoretical/ideological practices which cannot be collapsed into their "economic base" or seen in terms of their class "functions" alone: racism has a "life of its own" which cannot simply be reduced to its economic or political conditions of existence.

Similarly, racist practices, such as, segregation, genocide or exclusion, have their own political dynamic which transcends a simplistic class interest. Indeed racism may actually contradict the interests of capital rather than necessarily express them, as indeed Eugene Genovese has suggested for the USA. In Genovese's view, the political disequilibrium caused by the persistence of racism in the USA is such that the ruling class would be glad to ride of it.

For Britain too it could be argued that, contrary to Sivanandan's analysis, the imposition of racist immigration controls may not in fact have a very compelling economic logic, but may rather be the outcome of the partially independent processes by which racism has become politicised in Britain.

The associated argument, suggested by Black Struggle and implied by Sivanandan, that Britain's improved anti-discriminatory legislation is simply a mask for political stabilisation in favour of the capitalist status quo which should therefore be opposed is similarly one-dimensional and fatalistic, denying any autonomy to the political level and

6 P. Corrigan, "The welfare state as an arena of class struggle", (Marxism Today, March 1977); A. Booth "Political Strategy and Community Politics", (Marxism Today, April 1978).
7 B. Simon, "Education and social change—a Marxist perspective" (Marxism Today, February 1977).
9 E. Genovese, In Red and Black (Vintage) p. 60.
failing to see that state policy is a site of contradiction and struggle: even though the state in capitalist society may generally operate in the interests of capital, it does not, as Miliband has argued, act at its behest and further, it may be used to enact legislation and policy which has a genuinely progressive or pro-working-class character.

Thus a more fruitful analysis of the 1976 Race Relations Act is to see it as the outcome of struggle between social and political forces which have not in fact been the expression of any simple class polarisation: to argue that the liberal-left coalition of anti-racists who successfully lobbied for stronger legislation actually represented the interests of capital, whilst the conservative forces who argued for a laissez-faire position were presumably objectively supporting the cause of black liberation, is quite absurd. Such a position can only be adopted through the acceptance of the leftist view that all intervention by the state is an expression of the interests of the ruling class and hence must be opposed by the self-organisation of the working class.

Racism and capitalism

This is not, of course, to advocate the abandonment from the analysis of racism of all discussion of economic and class determinants: within this framework the autonomy of racism is only relative. Even though capitalism does not directly, exclusively, and necessarily "cause" racism—racist attitudes or practices may have existed before capitalism or may in some conditions become dysfunctional to capitalism, or may be found in existing socialist states—nevertheless it is the economic, political and ideological structures of capitalism that have been the major provider of the conditions under which racist ideologies and practices have been reproduced.

Connexions do have to be made, then, between racism and capitalism, between "race" relations and class structures, just as links have to be made at the political level between the anti-racist movement, class struggle, and the struggle for socialism.

Total autonomy

We reject, then, the framework of "total autonomy" where racism is seen as a totally independent and dominant force in the social structure. This has been a leading thread of conventional "race relations" scholarship in which "racial prejudice" is used as the major dynamic and explanatory factor.

This type of idealist analysis has been paralleled by some currents of radical black thought. Racism is a fundamental property of the whole of the white population, which takes on the characteristics of a colonial power—as all whites are contaminated by this force, racism is eliminable by the efforts of blacks alone, via their own movement for national and/or cultural liberation.

Here no connections tend to be made between class relationships and "race" relationships, parallel at the theoretical level perhaps to the radical feminist view on the irrelevance of class struggle to the struggle against men; the struggle against racism is primary and exclusive, with little attempt made to link the black struggle with the wider struggle of the working-class and the labour movement, which are in fact seen as part of the oppressive "white-power-structure".

The development of this "racial analysis" has to be understood as, at least in part, a reaction to the equally one-sided refusal by many sections of the left to grant any autonomy to the black or anti-racist movement by simply equating it with class struggle and the struggle against capitalism.

Political effects of reductionism

A central political consequence, then, of the theoretical collapse of the political and ideological levels of the social formation into the economic base has been the tendency to collapse the different levels of political struggle into each other. If racism is a simple product of capitalism, a mystique of class exploitation, eliminable only in socialist revolution, then the black and anti-racist movements must also be anti-capitalist, whilst anti-racists must be socialist, and preferably proletarian. Thus Liberals, progressive Tories, Churches, middle strata, are to be excluded in favour of a narrow stratum of proletarian and socialist forces, whilst racism is submerged within the wider struggle.

This is a subjective and elitist approach: although racism is a class issue, it is primarily a democratic and an ideological issue which demands a level of struggle that both addresses itself to the concrete reality of racist oppression and that encompasses a very broad base of political support.

Generalism

There are a number of ways in which the British left has, over the last decade, refused to acknowledge the autonomy and the specificity of the black and anti-racist movements, through its over-generalised and over-politicised class approach. There has been a long-standing tendency in the labour movement to shy away from the issue of racism as "diversionary" and divisive and to concentrate instead on those economic issues which can unite sections of workers across colour lines.


11 R. Franklin, S. Resnik The Political Economy of Racism (Holt Rinehart) Ch. 8.
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The associated argument, suggested by Black Struggle and implied by Sivanandan, that Britain's improved anti-discriminatory legislation is simply a mask for political stabilisation in favour of the capitalist status quo which should therefore be opposed is similarly one-dimensional and fatalistic, denying any autonomy to the political level and
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Amongst more recent developments, there is the current stance of the far left in opposing immigration controls as such (and import controls too) as fostering British chauvinism and nationalism: this “internationalist” position is essentially a piece of abstract rhetoric, which ignores any serious consideration of strategic or tactical questions and prevents a concentration on the specifically racist character of current British immigration laws and controls.

The far left has also tended to equate racism with the articulation of racist ideas by fascist groups and has, accordingly, tended to equate anti-racist activity with opposition to the National Front (as well as to immigration controls). This opposition has itself been frequently of a very narrow character, on the incorrect premise that only socialists can be genuine anti-fascists. The primary emphasis given to physical confrontation with fascists has frequently been aimed at provoking a clash with the police, thus demonstrating the inevitably racist character of the capitalist state.

We have seen above how a similarly fatalistic and one-dimensional view of the state as a class “instrument” has led Black Struggle and A. Sivanandan to suggest that any entanglement with the state-sponsored “race relations industry” in the form of community relations councils, race relations acts etc., is to be avoided as a form of class collaboration or political co-option of black resistance, rather than seen as a site of struggle in which important gains and reforms can be won.

These approaches are made possible by an insurrectionary perspective that by-passes the need to develop a national strategy for the transition to socialism or to struggle within state apparatuses to democratise and transform them in favour of a simple (and utopian) “smashing” or destruction of the capitalist/racist state.

The dominant feature, however, of these modes of anti-racist struggle is their over-general and schematic character which has prevented the left from wrestling with the concrete complexities of British racism and hence from articulating a serious and rounded anti-racist political strategy.

II TOWARDS A NON-REDUCTIONIST ANALYSIS: THE THREE LEVELS OF BRITISH RACISM

A framework of relative autonomy enables the distinction to be made, as in Mike Power’s proposal of the CP’s 1977 Congress resolution on Racism, between the three major levels in which racism is entrenched in Britain and can be opposed: (i) ideological/cultural (ii) institutional/structural (iii) organisational. The key to the Communist Party’s strategy in combating racism is to recognise that struggle has to take place on all three fronts, rather than to work primarily and exclusively at one level only, as has been the case among other left or liberal forces.

(a) Ideological and Cultural Racism

The pervasion of imperial British culture, folk-lore, poetry, novels, school-books, etc., with the images and stereotypes of the savage or child-like (i.e. never fully equal and human) “native” is now increasingly well-documented; those images confirmed the correctness of the British imperium, explaining and underpinning the economic exploitation, political domination, military overlordship and social segregation that Britons were directly or indirectly experiencing, and particularly, as Eric Hobsbawm suggests, acting as

“a mechanism by means of which a fundamentally egalitarian ideology rationalised its inequalities, and attempted to justify and defend those privileges which the democracy implicit in its institutions must inevitably challenge.”

At the scientific level then, racism flourished in Britain with particular vigour during the nineteenth-century, when the popularisation of evolutionary theory enabled the notion to be confirmed that some people were further advanced along the road of humanity and progress than others and were obviously equipped to rule them. The growth of nationalism and the heightening of inter-imperialist rivalries in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and the regular increase of “colonial troubles” during the post-world war I period intensified British ethnocentrism and chauvinism which was directed at Britain’s continental rivals as sharply as at her colonial subjects, albeit under the hegemony of the language of race—e.g. “wogs begin at Calais”.

It is then no exaggeration to suggest that racism has been a long standing cultural deformation in Britain, especially England, affecting the uniformed and civilian working-class as strongly as the aristocratic colonial administrator or missionary and the middle class entrepreneur; and the distortions of the colonial lens linger on.

The starkness of this colonial mentality was suffered by the earlier African settlers who came into British ports like Liverpool and Cardiff in the early part of this century. Many of these ex-seamen married local white women, who often experienced

12 CPGB 35th Congress Document No. 22 “Composite on struggle against racism and fascism”.
13 See for e.g. D. Kuya The dragon’s teeth (Merseyside CRC). For racism in the imperial period in general, see V. Kiernan Lords of human kind (Penguin).
ostracism as a result, as manifested during the 1919 "race riots" in Liverpool when white ex-servicemen rampaged through the "African" quarter deliberately attacking households where the colonial taboo on "mixed" marriage had been broken, chasing an African fireman to his death by drowning in the Mersey, and thus compelling the police to place most of Liverpool's Africans in protective custody

The continuing myth of the deprived Liverpool "half-caste", born to a low-class, incapable white woman and an absent feckless African father, is a testimony to the power of the racial/colonial status-barrier

### Domestic racism

A new definition of Britain's black population developed during the 1950s and 1960s when ex-colonial subjects were encouraged to come to the Mother Country to fill those slots in her heavy or decaying industry, in her hospitals and railways, that the indigenous population would not or could not fill at least at the rates of pay and conditions that the employers were willing to offer. Black people came to be defined as an internal problem and burden, creating inadequacies and shortages in social services, housing and schools, and exacerbat­ing inner-city decline and violence.

It would be tempting to analyse this process in terms of an in-built racist continuity of the British character or culture, as is suggested from within the purely autonomous, "racial" framework. But this is facile and historicist, missing out the structural and political determinants whereby the impact of history is mediated.

The transition from colonial racist ideology to contemporary indigenous racism need not be seen in a deterministic, unilinear model. The colonial ideology whereby blacks were depicted as different, savage, child-like etc., certainly provided some of the ideological conditions of existence whereby blacks have continued to be classified as different, inferior or a threat.

But a major conjunctural determinant of the new social meaning of "colour" or "blackness" was the debate over immigration controls in the 1960s when a bi-partisan view was finally articulated by politicians and the mass media that black people were a cause of friction and difficulty, a drain on our resources which we could not afford, and a group of people to whom no permanent obligations were owed despite their citizenship.

This capitulation to the racist definition of the situation—black immigrants as a major cause of Britain's social and economic problems whose inflow must therefore be severely curtailed—has been of tremendous significance in developing the contemporary framework for racism in Great Britain, and from the beginning has severely weakened the credibility of government or government-connected reform measures: thus the Labour Government's 1965 legislation to outlaw certain forms of racial discrimination was only one aspect of a fundamentally self-contradictory policy which also included further restrictions on the entry of "Commonwealth", i.e. essentially black, immigrants.

The adoption then of increasingly restrictive racist immigration controls, administered with the bureaucratic inhumanity of the British colonial and immigration services, provided a legitimate frame­work within which traditional colonial rightlessness could be officially transformed into the contemporary equation of black, immigrant, social problem and relatively right less object.

### The political economy of black labour

These political and ideological developments were facilitated by the material situation of black immi­grants, who had been recruited to Britain as a cheap replacement labour force and who residually also tended to act as a replacement population in those decaying centres of inner cities where housing was available.

The mounting articulation of the "problem" of blacks as economic competitors and as the cause of urban decline has therefore had some material basis on which to grow. The "moral panics" thai have developed around "mugging", for example, have fed on the reality of the mode of subsistence of some sections of marginalised black youth; while the clamour to develop ever-tighter racist immigration controls, and the ensuing numbers game that has been an easy substitute for serious debate over immigration, have provided a common-sense focus and object for the employment insecurities and fears of the current economic crisis.

Structural factors, then, have certainly under­pinned the development of ideological and cultural racism in this period: but the gradual elimination of the category of enfranchised commonwealth citizen in favour of the category of alien black contract

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17 See ed. A. Humfrey's Liverpool, a multi-racial city (Crown St. Language Centre, Liverpool); I. Melish, P. McNabb and G. Ben-Tovim "The relevance of 'race' to educational opportunity in Inner City Liverpool" in Select Committee on Race Relations and Immigration, Education Vol. 13, (HMSO 1973), and "Patterns of discriminatory behaviour by police and in the courts facing the locally born black population in Liverpool" ibid., Police/Immigrant Relations, Vol. 2 (HMSO 1972).
labour cannot be reduced to the economic conditions of existence of this policy, although the transformation from capitalist prosperity to capitalist crisis certainly facilitated a shift in emphasis from labour recruitment (economic benefit) to immigration controls (economic costs).

It may be true to say that "in the last instance" economic factors have been the ultimate determinant of racism, in the sense that post-war British capitalism has set the structural parameters (labour needs, profitability crisis, technological under-development, youth unemployment, housing market, industrial under-investment, etc.) within which racism has developed.

But it is also essential to point out that the legal transformation in the position of black people in Britain has been fought out on the terrain of a specific ideological and political discourse (i.e. Tory vs Labour competition; internal Labour Party factional strife etc.) which has had its own independent effects and its own internal determinants.

The battle of ideas

A politics of anti-racism must therefore address itself seriously to the specificities and weight of racist ideology in Britain, by undermining the factual distortions that are implicit in racial categories and explicit in racist argumentation, by exposing the undemocratic and class-divisive aims of racist organisations, by reiterating the universalism enshrined in both liberal and socialist ideology, by stressing the positive value of multi-culturalism and developing popular modes of multi-racial identification, by consciousness-raising amongst white and black to eradicate supremacist and subordinate attitudes, by campaigning against media stereotyping and distortions, by alternative explanations of the current crisis, and by the development of a set of demands and policies that are consistent in their opposition to all forms of racist activity and practice.

(b) Institutional and Structural Racism

Racism cannot be analysed simply in terms of an ideology of biologically or culturally determined differences, inferiority and necessary subordination. It is also used to refer to the practices whereby a particular group is separated out for various systematic types of hostile and discriminatory treatment.

The growth of British immigration controls in which the main object has been to control the entry and settlement of blacks (seen vividly in the "patrial" and "non-patrial" categories of the 1971 Act) has been, we have argued, a prime example of the way racism has become institutionalised in Britain, in this case via the legal state apparatus.

Racial discrimination or disadvantage is also well-documented in many other areas of institutionalised relationships and practices. Thus the policies and routines of police, employers, trade unionists, housing authorities or the education system may operate to ensure that black people are subjected to various inter-linked forms of oppression: they experience police harassment and criminalisation, as in the widespread use of "sus" charges against them; they are clustered in the unskilled sectors of the industrial or service working-class, in the unemployed, or at the bottom rungs of the professional or white-collar strata; they are under-represented in positions of responsibility, authority or power in the labour movement (trades union official, shop steward, city councillor, MP); they are under-represented in council housing or concentrated in poorer quality "problem" estates, and generally endure a disproportionate share of housing without basic facilities; they are over-represented in ESN schools, subject to a "hidden curriculum" of racist values, and under-placed in "A" streams, in sixth forms and in higher education.

These outcomes are not simply the result of conscious acts of racial discrimination; the normal operation of customary practices or policies may work to the unconscious disadvantage of black people (e.g. criteria for inclusion on a council waiting list), or the normal structuring of opportunities by the workings of the class system may also be involved (e.g. the universal situation of working-class people living in a working-class area with poor housing, inadequate schooling, few occupational prospects and hostile police-community relations).

Again, this picture is over-drawn: there is enormous variation of experience and structural position within the category of "black people": there is a danger of creating a new/old stereotype of blacks as a victim/object, rather than as subjects responding to their situations with a wide range of reactions.

But specifically racist practices do occur: the official creation of the category of "immigrant child" within the education system and practices of enforced dispersal and bussing; the development by housing authorities of policies of involuntary racial concentration or de-ghettoisation; the police/press depiction of "mugging" as a racial offence; the social service categorisation of black children as "hard to place": the frequent collusion by management and union in attempting to maintain certain grades of labour as exclusively white and so to artificially freeze black workers in the category of cheap unskilled labour, low-grade professional, or outside the labour market altogether; the frequent use of "colour-bars" to exclude black people from

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18 See e.g. D. Smith & A. Whalley *Racial Minorities and Public Housing* (PEP) and J. Rex & R. Moore *Race Community & Conflict* (OUP).
club or pub; violent racial assaults; and, of course, the racial differentiations adopted by the immigration legislation.

Colour, then, is widely used in British society as a cue to, and a rationale for a stereotyped and negative response: racism has become institutionalised into the structure of British society in so many spheres that these practices cannot simply be dissolved into the practices of class discrimination, disadvantage and inequality with which they are so closely and dynamically inter-related. Even if the motives behind acts of racial discrimination are concerned with maintaining class, status or power relations and positions, the effect is still one of contributing to a specifically "racial" oppression.

**The De-institutionalisation of racism**

An anti-racist political strategy, then, cannot simply operate at the ideological level of exposure, attitude-changing, and multi-celebration, vital though these are. It is also essential to develop positive policies specifically designed to "deracialise" the British institutional fabric, in all those arenas in which racism is enshrined. This will involve struggling to repeal racist immigration controls and legislation; pressing for the implementation and strengthening of legislation against racial discrimination and incitement; working towards "affirmative action" or "positive discrimination" programmes in employment and in the labour movement, and the radical extension of "job creation" schemes; the development of racially-just housing policies, and a serious onslaught on inner city decay; a de-colonisation of the education system by the saturation of the curriculum with multi-cultural materials (ethnic studies), together with the allocation of far more resources to inner city schools and an assault on teacher and pupil-racism.

Many of these reforms are being pressed through community relations councils (CRC), or could be taken up through those bodies as they have some privileged access to the local authority—although one of the contradictions of the CRCs has been their relative lack of status and resources within the local authorities: their official position elevates them from a level of campaigning grass-roots body yet fails to provide them with the means to operate successfully at the level of the council hierarchy, thus frequently suffering from a serious ambiguity which has tended to neutralise them at both levels.

Many of these reforms would be of universal benefit, being geared to the schools or neighbourhoods or structural situations that black people share with others; in a racist atmosphere where black people are already presented ideologically as over-protected and privileged such policies are of particular importance as a means to undermine the "racist backlash". But, again, to completely dissolve areas of specifically racial oppression into a more general class oppression is to fall into the reductionist problematic outlined above: if racism has some degree of relative autonomy, then specifically anti-racist policies must be fought for which cannot necessarily be collapsed into issues of a more universal application.

(c) **Racialist Organisations**

The final level at which racism operates, and where accordingly opposition has to be mounted, is at the level of those organisations (defined here as "racialist") which consciously utilise racist theory and sentiment as a major ideological device to further their political aims as have fascist parties like the National Front.

**Racism and Fascism**

It is important to maintain distinctions between (i) racism and fascism and (ii) fascist political parties and non-fascist parties which adopt racist policies. The failure to make these differentiations has been a central part of the largely misplaced reaction by the far left to the growth of both racism and fascism in Britain in the recent period.

The British State, as David Edgar has argued, has played a central role in the institutionalisation of racism, as have the Conservative and Labour Governments which have legislated racist immigration controls. But to refer to Britain as "fascist" as was suggested by Ian Macdonald in *Race and Class* and as is argued by certain Maoist groups is totally misleading. It involves yet again the problem of reductionism outlined above. If racism has some degree of relative autonomy, then specifically anti-racist policies must be fought for which cannot necessarily be collapsed into issues of a more universal application.


21 D. Edgar, "Racism Fascism and the National Front" (a *Race and Class* pamphlet).


economic reductionism referred to above: if the state has as one of its functions the reproduction of the system of monopoly capitalism, then this view suggests that it is irrelevant whether the form of the state is a bourgeois democracy or a fascist dictatorship. They are both “dictatorships of the bourgeoisie” and are therefore equally oppressive to the working class. The plausibility of this approach is strengthened by the authoritarian tendencies that can be indicated within the state, especially if they have a racist character.

Of course, in reality, whether or not the political form of the state is a parliamentary democracy or a fascist dictatorship is of vital significance for the articulation of a revolutionary socialist strategy; similarly, whether or not a political party is democratic like the Conservative or Labour Party, or fascist like the National Front, is of fundamental importance, even when the policies or views of these democratic parties’ members or governments share some of the racist assumptions articulated by the fascist ultra-right.

Racism then may develop with or without the growth of fascist parties; fascism may or may not be racialist; parties or governments which adopt racist policies are not necessarily fascist. The struggle against racism then cannot be reduced to opposition to fascist organisations, a major strategic error compounded by the equation of state racism with fascist or right-wing Tories with the National Front.

Nationalism and populism

Many factors need to be included in a full analysis of the rise of the National Front to its current position as a serious force in British politics. At the most general level, it has to be placed in the context of the gathering post-boom economic, political and ideological crisis of British capitalism.

The mounting economic crisis has been the backdrop, the factor “determinant in the last instance” that has provided the conditions under which political and ideological trends conducive to National Front growth have developed.

The last decade has seen a new epoch of British nationalism, in which the Scottish and Welsh nationalist movements have flowered, particularly at the Labour Party’s expense, the “direct result”, Eric Hobsbawm suggests, “of the failure of the British Labour Party in the 1960s” to reverse the inter-war decline of the early industrial regions of Wales and Scotland; the other source of nationalism, Hobsbawm argues, is the increasing reaction to centralised bureaucracy that has been capitalised on by the populist style of the Nationalist Parties which have become the main bearers of these potentially democratic but also potentially sectarian and chauvinist aspirations. Thus the stress on national identity and national or regional rights has opened the door to an English nationalism in which a racially authoritarian “Little Englandism” is replacing the previous racially paternalistic internationalism of "Great Britain”.

The growth of the nationalist parties has been one expression of the increasing political volatility of the British electorate that has also worked to the advantage of the National Front. The move from Labour in Scotland and Wales is an indication of the growing inability of the Labour Party to maintain its solid core of industrial working-class votes; similarly the Liberal eclipse of the Conservatives in Liverpool has indicated the potentially fragile nature of the solidarity of lower-middle class Tory voters who have been won over by the relative dynamism and populist style of the Liverpool Liberals. The ability of the National Front to draw in previous supporters of both the Labour and the Conservative Parties is a tribute both to the potential political instability of the current situation, and the relative skill of the National Front leadership.

Turn to the Right

Alongside this fluidity we have seen an increasing political polarisation in this recent period, which has worked out largely to the advantage of the right. The post-war "Butskellist" political consensus between moderate Labour and moderate Tory to accept social democracy and the interventionist, welfare state (within capitalist confines) has been finally broken, through the ascendancy of the Thatcherite wing of the Conservative Party. This is a reflection of the increasing vigour in recent-years of the right as manifested by the growth of the National Association for Freedom, Powellism, the Institute for the Study of Conflict, the Black Papers in Education, Sir Keith Joseph’s "Policy Centre", Bernard Levin's crusade for "moderate" trade unionism, and other such developments.

This internal development within the Conservative Party must be seen within the context of the more general shift to the right in British society which the Tories, along with the mass media, have been reflecting and articulating. The recent period has seen, as Stuart Hall suggests, the increasingly elaborated construction of an "authoritarian popular social consensus" in British society, a "growing law and order mood", a

anyone who is "scrounging" on the welfare state or not pulling his weight in society, support for tougher sentences and policing policies and harsher prison sentences, and so on".25

This theme, the backlash perhaps to the social permissiveness and political advances of the swinging sixties and the subversive seventies—the epoch of youth culture, student power, drugs, gays, black power, communes, women's liberation, trade union militancy, sit-ins and occupations, the growth of the left and the renaissance of Marxism—has been taken up with venom by the National Front who are as hostile to gays, liberated women, and "liberalism" as they are to reds and blacks.

Crisis, scapegoat and National Front organisation

The material basis for these political and ideological currents has been the mounting economic insecurities and deprivations facing the manual working class, the self-employed, and even white-collar and professional workers in the period of the recent economic recession, with inflation, unemployment, and public spending cuts affecting most sectors of the population.

In this situation black people have been increasingly identified by the National Front as the symbol of British decline and the scapegoat for the current crisis: blacks are the muggers, the welfare state scroungers, the privileged competitor for the scarce resources of jobs and housing, the burden whose backwardness is pulling down British standards, the tangible base from which to attack the state, the liberals, the left and the churches who protect the blacks and trample on the Englishman's freedom.26

This scapegoating process appears to have been particularly effective in those areas where the presence of "coloured immigrants" and the material shortages, decay, and insecurities can be tied together into a simple causal chain—particularly where the position of immigrant workers as a culturally differentiated "under-class" (e.g. Asian workers on a segregated nightshift in a poorly unionised industry in a declining community) involves major discontinuities in experience and contact that provide a material base for the acceptance of divisive racist propaganda.

Racism then is increasingly becoming the populist binding for the authoritarian consensus that is being constructed by a wide range of social, cultural and political forces in Britain, of which the National Front is only the most overt and the most aggressive.

It is not being suggested that the recent advance of the National Front can be seen as the inevitable product of these general economic, political and ideological trends of post-boom Britain. The rise of the Front must also be examined in terms of its own determinate political and ideological practices: the welding together of the earlier sects, the internal struggles, the development of its cadres, and its organisation, the growth of its populist style, its general ideology and programme.27 The overall socio-economic background cannot explain the success of the National Front, whether simplistic notions of ruling class interests or devices are used or a more elaborate analysis of British social developments; neither can an internal account of National Front theory and policy that is isolated from the material and ideological conditions to which they are addressed and through which they are mediated.

Anti-Front Strategies

It follows from this brief analysis that the strategy of attempting to "smash" the Front by forceful confrontation alone is misguided. If the National Front is currently developing a populist programme which is causing reverberations amongst sections of the working-class and the petit-bourgeoisie through its articulation of a widely accepted and state-supported racist ideology, and through its ability to fill the space for popular, community politics vacated by the Labour Party, then a strategy of simply taking them on at street level leaves untouched the wider political and ideological spaces and the wider societal racism.

Thus we have seen the struggle against the National Front being diverted into an abstract debate around "free speech", when the conditions have demanded, as the main thrust of anti-fascist activity, a non-violent but vigorous and imaginative campaign of propaganda, and legal pressure to

27 See M. Walker The National Front (Fontana); The National Front investigated (Labour Research Department 1978); back copies of Searchlight; and I. Crewe The Politics of Race (Croom Helm 1975).
28 For this issue, NB Mihaly Vajda's argument that: "on the one hand fascism can only be accounted for if it is treated as a phenomenon of capitalist society, but on the other hand it cannot be regarded as a movement which is actually launched by the ruling class and moreover it openly contradicts the interests of the ruling class in certain cases."
isolate the National Front, to prove that it is the National Front who are undemocratic, and to argue the need for National Front speeches, activities and marches to be monitored and arraigned for specific breaches of the Race Relations and Public Order Acts.

As it is, the obsession by sections of the ultra-left with physically "crushing" the National Front and with preventing them having any platform irrespective of the support won or earnable for the counter-action, the means used and the specific conjunctural conditions, has perhaps worked to the advantage of the National Front, by winning it publicity, and enabling the police and other arms of the state to support the fascists or at least to be neutral in their blanket treatment of left and right demonstrators, marches, public meetings, etc.

The rest of the left, the Labour movement and the liberal forces must accept some responsibility for the initiative having lain in the hands of the National Front and the right, as they have largely failed to develop a popular, non-violent and creative opposition to the National Front, and, more widely, a popular and democratic politics. It is significant to note here that the most imaginative and contemporary approach to anti-fascist struggle is to be found in the work of the Anti-Nazi League, Rock Against Racism and associated groups, organisations in which the "old left"—Tribune MPs, the Communist Party and the trade union movement—have not been major forces, but where, if any group is "hegemonic", it is, ironically perhaps, the Socialist Workers Party.

The particular importance of these groups is their ability to reach out in a counter-populist style to the sector of working-class, unorganised, unemployed, school student or culturally defined (e.g. "punk") youth whose very distance from and frequent disillusionment with the labour movement and the left might tend to make them a potentially significant source of fascist support.

However, just as racism cannot be equated with fascism, so opposition to racism cannot be limited to essentially anti-fascist or anti-nazi opposition, however broad-based and imaginative the approach: for as David Edgar has argued,

"an anti-fascist strategy which concentrates solely or primarily on defeating the National Front will have little practical or ideological effect on the racist attitudes of the population at large or the state apparatus that enshrines them".29

III THE STRUGGLE AGAINST RACISM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SOCIALISM

We have suggested then that a framework of "relative autonomy" demands of the left that it addresses itself to each of the three inter-linked and mutually indispensable sites of specifically anti-racist struggle (ideological, institutional and organisational) without collapsing them into the more general arena of class struggle. This must involve a respect for the autonomy of black or ethnic organisations or of black caucuses within "mixed" groups.

But this framework also requires that links be forged between anti-racist, black struggle and the struggle for socialism, for a Marxist perspective argues that it is only socialism under conditions of economic planning, popular democratic political control, and collectivist but pluralist culture that can provide the necessary, albeit not sufficient, structural, political and ideological conditions for the elimination of racism.

But the links between the struggles cannot be forged in the old mechanical way, still found in many sections of the left, of simply exposing capitalism's inability to tackle racism and making abstract propaganda for socialism on that basis. This is a fatalist and ultimately insurrectionary perspective.

Rather it must be acknowledged that in this sphere of struggle, as in so many others, many positive reforms and improvements can be won from the capitalist state, such as anti-racist legislation, youth employment and retraining opportunities, urban renewal, adult further education, etc. Of course such advances may be limited, and the major transformations of the economy, employment-structure, housing and education required to uproot structural racism may be unattainable in the near future. But nonetheless serious inroads can be made at levels of national government and local authority, if mass united anti-racist struggle begins to take on concrete and attainable political objectives.

The key issue for revolutionaries at this point was raised in a general way by Betty Matthews in her recent Marxism Today article, when she talked of the problem of moving from the defence of rights under attack, typified perhaps by the black and anti-racist movements, to that of "consciously challenging the strongholds and structures of capitalist power".30

Constructive solutions

The linking mechanism here, as in many other arenas of struggle, is perhaps the projection of "constructive solutions" to aspects of racism which both address themselves adequately to black people's specific problems but also involve an extension of democracy, structural changes, and a limitation of ruling class power.

At the level of institutionalised and structural racism, an attack on practices which promote racial

29 D. Edgar op. cit.

30 B. Matthews "Notes on democratic struggle in the transition to socialism" (Marxism Today, March 1978) p. 83.
discrimination, disadvantage or oppression involves
the development of policies of conscious intervention
in the market for housing and jobs, and in the
spheres of education, planning and the legal/judicial
system. This constitutes a continuing erosion of the
principles of capitalist production and reproduction
as well as an attack on general policies which
disadvantage and oppress the working class as a
whole, such as the cut-back in public expenditure.
Furthermore the consciousness and organisation of
black and ethnic groups is compelling such state
intervention to be democratic, in so far as black
reactions to white paternalism, bureaucracy and
authority (and to black tokenism) involve demands
for dialogue, participation and control in local
decision-making and resource allocation.

At the ideological level, a positive stress on multi-
culturalism indicates a respect for pluralism which
the left, and especially the Communist Party, must
actively promote, both for its intrinsic value and as
a means towards the elimination of the equation of
socialism with monolithism and ideological/cultural
repression; an attack on "racial bias" in school
text-books and the media opens the door to the
analysis and opposition to the more general class
bias within the school curriculum, and in the
educational and ideological apparatuses in general,
that provides an important source of ruling class
hegemony; and the need to provide alternative
explanations for Britain's crisis, urban decline etc.,
to the racial and anti-Marxist "analyses" of the
National Front, Powell and Thatcher, facilitates and
often directly demands the articulation of a left-wing,
democratic perspective.

Broad democratic alliance

Finally at the organisational level: the develop-
ment of opposition to racism and fascism has the
potential for concretely drawing together most of
the elements of the "broad democratic alliance"
envisioned in the British Road to Socialism. Already
many of the anti-racist, anti-fascist or anti-Nazi
committes show a healthy range of social forces
through the involvement of black and ethnic
organisations, the trade unions, women's groups,
the gay movement, community groups, students
and religious organisations, and through their
ability to win the support of a very wide range of
political groups, including the Broad Left (Labour
and Communist Parties, and unaligned socialists)
Liberals, the far left, and progressive Tories.

The extension and solidification of the anti-racist
movement through the recognition of both its
autonomy and its relativity will not simply have the
defensive significance of supporting the struggles
of black people against oppression and of under-
mining the current right-wing and fascist offensives
in Britain that have increasingly been using racism
as their major energising force; it can also play a
very big part in forging a network of broad-based
local alliances whose struggles can enforce ideo-
logical, political and material changes that may
have an important transforming character, in
dynamising, perhaps, a new egalitarian and anti-
authoritarian popular consensus, spearheading a
significant political realignment of class forces, and
imposing democratic and structural reforms of
value to the whole of the working class and popular
strata.

Role of the Communist Party

However the maintenance of such a system of
alliances is highly complex and fragile, as a number
of deep ideological divisions, and sectional anta-
gonisms may be involved in these formations.

Only the most skilful political leadership can
maintain the unity of such diverse groups around
positive activities and demands, a role that the
Communist Party can play on account of its hetero-
gegeneous membership, its contacts and roots, and its
strategic rather than simply tactical commitment to
pluralism and to the necessity and value of such
alliances.

But the Communist Party must recognise in the
success of the Anti-Nazi League/Rock Against
Racism grouping and the growing influence and
scope of the Socialist Challenge/Socialist Unity
bloc that other forces of the left are able to play a
significant dynamising role, particularly amongst
working-class youth whose structural position,
experiences and ideological orientation leaves them
untouched by other anti-racist or anti-fascist groups
and alienated from more formal political formations,
trade unions or voluntary associations, or amongst
black organisations who have written off the "old
left" for having failed to adequately combat racism
within the labour movement.

Finally the Communist Party must itself practice
"relative autonomy" in its own relationship to the
anti-racist movement: as well as acting as a major,
though by no means exclusive, unifying force, it
must also present itself as an autonomous political
organisation with its own independent demands,
campaigns, meetings and publications.

The struggle against racism, and the related
though not interchangeable struggle against fascism,
has at last been recognised as one of the most
important tasks facing the labour and progressive
movements: for the Communist Party it poses the
challenge of whether it has the flexibility and
imagination, the political maturity and freedom from
sectarianism, the revolutionary clan and the revo-
lutionary realism to find ways of bringing to life and
sustaining in a positive political direction its key
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